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False Nostalgia

The "good old days" weren't all that good—but they're still messing with politics.

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If you visit Hagley Park in the West Midlands of England and make it to the big 18th century house of the Lyttelton family, walk another half-mile to the east and you'll come upon an exotic and impressive sight once you clear the trees.

In front of you is what seems like the ruins of a Gothic castle. There are four corner towers, but only one is still standing, complete with battlements and an intersecting stair turret. The others are reduced to one or two stories and the wall connecting them has collapsed. Just two remaining windows impress the spectator with their tall Gothic arches. Below them is a pointed doorway and above it three shield reliefs.

You stand there in awe, lost in thought. It is a place of history and memory. You start thinking about the ancient experiences of which this place could speak, and you wonder what spectacular building once stood here.

The answer is none. The ruin was constructed just like this in the mid–18th century. The purpose was to give the impression that this was a place of wonder where a magnificent castle had once been until time, nature, and a few heroic (or barbaric) acts reduced it to a state of decay. It is a selective, artificial version of history—very much like the politics of nostalgia that are in vogue today. They tap into a powerful sentiment, a widespread yearning for the good old days. When asked if life in their country is better or worse today than 50 years ago, 31 percent of the British, 41 percent of Americans, and 46 percent of the French say that it is worse.

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Nostalgia is not new. The mock castle of Hagley Park was not extraordinary back in its day. Building ruins from scratch—"ruin follies"—was at the height of fashion for the European aristocracy in the 18th century. They built shattered castles and crumbling abbeys to commemorate their real or imagined past. In 1836, Edward Hussey III of Scotney Castle in Kent improved his old house by smashing it and turning it into a ruin that made for a nice view from his new house. In the late 18th century, another aristocrat built an extravagant six-story tower in Désert de Retz in France, made to look like the remaining column of a colossal temple. Right beside it he built a ruined Gothic chapel.

The ruin craze was part of a broader reaction against the Enlightenment and its ideals of reason and progress. The reaction came to be called Romanticism. It glorified nature, nation, and history and turned the nostalgic desire for childhood and home country from pathology to movement. Sometimes it was not a rejection of modernity but a way to create a continuity that made it easier to live with change, as industrialization and urbanization quickly changed living conditions. "This acute awareness of tradition is a modern phenomenon that reflects a desire for custom and routine in a world characterized by constant change and innovation," wrote the architect and writer Witold Rybczynski in 1986.

Nostalgia and Nationalism

The term nostalgia was coined by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688. It was his word for the sad, obsessive desire of students, servants, and soldiers in foreign lands to return to their home. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, comparative literature scholar Svetlana Boym points to the curious fact that, by the end of the 18th century, intellectuals from different national traditions began to claim they had a special term for bittersweet homesickness that did not exist in any other language. Germans had *heimweh*, French people had *maladie du pays*, Russians had *toska*, and Polish people had *tesknota*. Other emerging nations also claimed that only they, because of their unique national identity, knew the true meaning of the sad, beautiful welling-up of longing. Boym "is struck by the fact that all these untranslatable words are in fact synonyms; and all share the desire for untranslatability, the longing for uniqueness."

This was the era when governments and intellectuals began to construct national identities, especially to resist occupation during the Napoleonic Wars and to rebuild afterward. The folk songs they praised as a pure expression of the people's traditional sentiments were rewritten with new lyrics because the old ones were just a little bit too authentic—far too vulgar and not sufficiently patriotic. Authorities also created national languages, often by systematizing a local dialect and enforcing it on everybody through the education system. Linguistic boundaries became rigid, and many oral traditions perished. In the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which lasted until 1806, only one-quarter of the population spoke German. Even in Prussia, which did the most to encourage poets and writers to create a common German identity to resist Napoleon, German was just one of six major languages. At the 1815 Congress of Vienna, Prussia was registered as a "Slav kingdom," and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel talked of Brandenburg and Mecklenburg as "Germanized Slavs." In his book *The Myth of Nations*, the historian Patrick J. Geary claimed that even in a country like France, with centuries-old national boundaries and long linguistic traditions, not many more than half spoke French as their native language in 1900. Others spoke different Romance languages and dialects, and in some areas Celtic and Germanic languages.

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Just as the aristocrats built fake ruins, kings and poets were now erecting artificial ethnicities and nations. Some did it out of love for the homeland, but some also saw its potential as a cement for ideological collectivism. Yet although such ruins and ethnicities are artificial, our feelings for them are real. Evolutionary psychology has revealed that it only takes trivial similarities between people to create strong bonds with strangers. So it's not strange that an idea of a common history and destiny unites people easily. And while the history of ethnic nationalism is, as former U.S. diplomat Dan Fried has pointed out, like cheap alcohol—first it makes you drunk, then it makes you blind, then it kills you—civic forms of nationalism have inspired fights for freedom and inclusion of immigrants and minority groups too.

Nostalgia is a natural, even important, state of mind, according to psychologists. Anchoring our identity in something enduring helps us when all that is solid seems to be melting into air. Everything changes, but we need a sense of stability and predictability. When things change too fast, we lose our sense of control. This is probably why a yearning for the past is especially likely when we experience rapid transitions, like maturing into adulthood, aging into retirement, dislocation, migration, or rapid technological advancement.

People going through rough times can be helped by remembering better days in the past. For dementia sufferers, nostalgia can help establish some sense of personal continuity. The best way to deal with it is not leeches or opium (or execution, which a Russian general threatened nostalgic soldiers with during the War of the Polish Succession in 1733). It is a glass of wine, the favorite music from your teens, and the family photo album.

As James Madison University religion professor Alan Jay Levinovitz explains, it is important to make a distinction between three sorts of nostalgia: personal, historical, and collective. Personal nostalgia is made up of first-person memories and contributes to your own sense of identity and history. If personal nostalgia is about what life was like for you in the past, historical nostalgia is a generalization about what the past was like, often in the form of a longing for an enchanted, simple world—the good old days. Collective nostalgia is the emotional attachment to collective cultural identities: "This is what my group was like" or "this is what my group endured in the past." Just like personal nostalgia, this emotion can be a source of strength that helps someone through difficult periods. The insight (or illusion) that your people or your nation endured something together can help and inspire. But it is also easily abused by [those] who claim they can restore…that [which] has been lost.

That is a false promise, because we can't go back—and even if we could, we wouldn't find what we were looking for. It was never there and, in any case, would not be able to give us the solution to our current problems. One way of revealing that is to look at what the good old days were really like.

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

In a wonderful podcast episode, *Build for Tomorrow* host Jason Feifer explored nostalgia throughout history...[He asked the question, when was America at its best?] The most popular answer seemed to be the 1950s. So then he asked scholars of the '50s whether people in the '50s thought they were the good old days. Definitely not. People were worried about race and class, the impact of television, and the very real threat of instant nuclear annihilation. There was anxiety about rapidly changing family life and especially the new youth cultures and mindless, consumer-oriented students on campus. American sociologists warned that rampant individualism was tearing the family apart.

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But there must have been exceptions. For example, being an autoworker in Detroit must have been amazing, considering how often this group is featured in current labor market nostalgia. Or was it?

When historian Daniel Clark launched an oral history project to find out how the autoworkers themselves experienced it, he fully expected to hear stories about a lost Eden. However, as Clark wrote, "hardly anyone, male or female, white or African American, recalled the 1950s as a time of secure employment, rising wages, and improved benefits."

Instead, Clark was told about economic volatility, precarious employment, and recurring unemployment. In 1952, one-tenth of all U.S. unemployment was concentrated in the city of Detroit. Impressive hourly wages don't say much about annual incomes if you are only called in temporarily and quickly let go. Most of the workers Clark spoke with recounted how they had to take secondary gigs (cab driver, trash hauler, janitor, cotton picker, moving company worker, golf caddy) to pay the bills.

"Autoworkers fell behind on installment plans, resulting in repossessions of their purchases, and they found it impossible to keep up with mortgages and rents," Clark wrote. "Most autoworkers, and especially those with families, were priced out of the market for the new cars that they built."

Our collective rosy memory of Detroit in the '50s is based on the fact that those who managed to hold on to a long-term full-time job in these industries had significantly better wages than most Americans, because the country was still so poor back then. This was especially true of the group employed during the mini-boom of 1953. In other words, the narrative of our lost era of manufacturing is based on a single American city in a single year during the very peculiar time after World War II, during which Europe's industrial infrastructure was destroyed.

And how much did these lucky few get paid? Well, the autoworkers union managed to push up the hourly wage to about $1.30, which is equivalent to around $17 today. That happens to be the same average starting wage Amazon began to pay warehouse workers in May 2021.

In fact, many people in the '50s pointed to the '20s as the good old days. But back in the 1920s, people worried about how rapid technological change was threatening our sanity—radio and recorded music gave us too much speed and choice. So did the automobile, which would probably ruin the morals of the young. In *The New York Times*, you could read on the front page that scientists had concluded that "American life is too fast." The famous child psychologist John Watson warned that increasing divorce rates meant the American family would soon cease to exist. Many romanticized the calmer lifestyle of the late 1800s. Seeing how family life was changing, some began to idealize the Victorian family, when they thought that fathers were really fathers, mothers were really mothers, and children respected their elders.

But at the turn of the century, the railroads, the telegraph, and rapid urbanization were undermining traditional communities and ways of life. Many people worried about a fast-spreading disease caused by the unnatural pace of life: neurasthenia, which could express itself via anxiety, headaches, insomnia, back pain, constipation, impotence, and chronic diarrhea.

The Victorian middle classes handled the transitions of the era by becoming the first generation to value the old as such; they started to care about antiques and covered their walls with portraits of ancestors. The historian John Gillis has shown that their fear

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of urbanization and of work outside the household led them to invent the notion of a traditional family life that has been lost—a time that was simpler, less problematic, more rooted in place and tradition. They felt life before the Industrial Revolution was better. In the U.S., many people longed for the quieter, happier life they had before the Civil War.

Before the Industrial Revolution, family life was indeed different. Around half the members of a birth cohort died before they were 15 years old, and 27 percent of those who survived were fatherless by the time they reached that age. The share of marriages broken up prematurely by death was similar to the share broken up by divorces today. Most families sent children away to live in other households as servants or apprentices. After the French Revolution, Edmund Burke thought, "the age of chivalry is gone; that of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever." In America, many worried the republic had somehow lost its way since the Founders created it.

Feifer and the scholars he talked to in his podcast episode continued to look for the good old days, wandering further back into the past until they reached ancient Mesopotamia, some 5,000 years ago. After inventing civilization and writing, it didn't take more than two centuries before humans started writing about how difficult life now was and how it must have been so much easier in the past. It seems the first society was also the first nostalgic society.

The scholar Samuel Noah Kramer found examples of the Sumerians in cuneiform script complaining about how their leaders abused them and the merchants cheated and family life was not what it used to be. One clay tablet frets about "the son who spoke hatefully to his mother, the younger brother who defied his older brother, who talked back to the father." On an almost 4,000-year-old clay tablet, Kramer found the story of Enmerkar and the land of Aratta, an expression of the idea that there was once a golden age of peace and security, and that we had since fallen from this blessed state:

Once upon a time, there was no snake, there was no scorpion,
There was no hyena, there was no lion,
There was no wild dog, no wolf,
There was no fear, no terror,
Man had no rival. ...
The whole world, the people in unison,
To Enlil in one tongue gave praise.

In other words, if you happen to think we have uniquely difficult problems today, with a more rapid pace of life, corrupt rulers, and unruly youngsters, don't trust your feelings. Every generation has thought the same. Every generation has interpreted its struggle with the human predicament and the difficulty of relationships as a sign that things have become worse since a supposedly more harmonious time.

Why We Get Nostalgic

One important explanation for this historical nostalgia is that we know we survived these problems, so in retrospect they seem smaller. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. But we can never be certain we will be able to solve the problems we are facing today. That, however, has been the predicament of every generation, and that is why we always look back at a simpler time.

We know the radio didn't ruin the young, but we don't know if the smartphone will. We know we survived smallpox and polio, but we don't know about Ebola or the coronavirus.

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We know the planet didn't blow up during the Cold War, but who can say for sure that it won't happen this time around? And this also leads us to forget the terrible anguish our ancestors suffered when dealing with what were then the worst difficulties that they could imagine.

Another reason is that we often confuse personal nostalgia with the historical sort. When were the good old days? Was it by chance the one incredibly short period in mankind's history when you were alive and, more importantly, young? I can't say anything certain about you, of course, but when I ask people this question, that is the most common answer. And polls bear this out. A British study found that people in their 30s think life was better in the '90s than today. Brits in their 50s prefer the '80s, and those over 60 think life in the '60s was the best. A U.S. poll found that those born in the '30s and '40s thought the '50s was America's best decade, while those born in the '60s and '70s preferred the '80s. (It is interesting that the great nostalgic '70s and '80s television show *Happy Days* was set in a glamorous version of the '50s. A few decades later, we got another influential nostalgic television series, *Stranger Things*, now looking back fondly on the fashion and music of the 1980s, when we were all watching *Happy Days*.)

Isn't that why we have this great wave of nostalgia in the Western world right now? The big and influential baby boomer generation is retiring, and a suspiciously large share of them think the good old days were during their youth. Because when we are young, life for most people is exciting: Something new awaits around every corner. We scheme and dream, but we can also feel pretty safe, because our parents are there to take care of us and pick up our bills. Eventually, we all grow older and learn about the horrors of the world. We take on more responsibility, and we have kids ourselves. Suddenly we have to pay attention to every kind of risk and problem in society. With time, some of our dreams are frustrated, a certain decay in physical capacity sets in, and what once seemed new and exciting is replaced by things the now-young think are new and exciting but seem strange and unsettling to us.

It's easy to assume we have a clearer memory of things that happened to us recently. That is not the case. Researchers have found that we encode more memories during adolescence and early adulthood than during any other period of our lives, and when we think back on our lives, this is the period we most often return to. We might have this "reminiscence bump" because that was a period when we started forming our identity and experienced many firsts—first love, first job, first time we went to a Depeche Mode concert. It is a period of rapid change followed by stability, and so it figures prominently in our recollection of our lives.

Although strong, those memories are notoriously unreliable. When schoolchildren returning from summer holiday are asked to name good and bad things from the break, their lists are almost equally long. When the exercise is repeated a couple of months later, the list of good things grows longer and the bad list gets shorter. By the end of the year, the good things have pushed out the bad from their memories completely. They don't remember their summer anymore; just their idealized image of it. It is difficult for any version of the present to compete with that.

We should beware of politicians, populists, and parents who claim that things were better in the past and that we should try to recreate that former world. Certainly some things were better and we should investigate and learn from that, but trusting our gut feeling is letting ourselves be deceived by our reminiscence bump.

Nostalgia is a necessary human psychological trait, but it's not a governing philosophy.

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